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Knowing education in Thailand like a global expert organisation: politics, context and data

Steve Puttick[1], Chris Atkin[2], Wayne Dyble[3], Nick Gee[4], Ami Montgomery[5], Chawin Pongpajon[6], Waewalee Waewchimplee[7]

Abstract

Global expert organisations play increasingly significant roles in the way that education is understood and governed internationally, including by influencing the discourses through which education is conceptualised and shaping norms of what counts as success, failure, progress, and the most desirable visions for the future. By constructing understandings of education in multiple countries globally over extended periods of time, often through large-scale data generation, they create highly authoritative spaces of knowledge about education. Part of this influence is exerted through regular and substantial written reports about country-specific issues, progress and futures. This paper examines how education in Thailand comes to be known through global expert organisations by critically analysing a selection of reports on education in Thailand from 1999 to 2024. We argue that these reports produce distinctive ways of knowing that are de-politicised, de-contextualised, and heavily shaped by large scale international comparative data. We examine these knowledge practices through the conceptual lenses of time, scale and certainty. We conclude with a set of practical recommendations for enhancing reflexivity in the production of global expert organisation reports, including suggestions to; name underlying assumptions, situate claims in local contexts, critically reflect on classifications and categories, and communicate uncertainty more openly. We call for a more transparent, situated, and critically engaged approach to knowledge production about education in Thailand that supports more just and contextually grounded forms of global education governance.

Keywords

Education, Thailand, Global Expert Organisation, Knowledge

Introduction

Global expert organisations play increasingly significant roles in the way that education is understood and governed internationally. Such organisations – and in the current paper we focus mainly on the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development), and UNESCO

[1] Corresponding author, University of Oxford: steven.puttick@education.ox.ac.uk
[2, 3, 4, 5] Lincoln Bishop University
[6] Chulalongkorn University
[7] Nakhon Ratchasima Rajhabhat University

(United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) – influence the discourses through which education is conceptualised, producing distinctive understandings of what counts as success, failure, progress, and the most desirable visions for the future. Their objectives are framed as contributing to global development and cooperation, with each organisation's goals being distinct yet interconnected – mirroring the fluid, overlapping roles of individuals working within and across these organisations and broader educational governance networks over time (Ball & Junemann, 2012). The OECD describes its aim as promoting policies that improve economic and social well-being around the world, particularly through evidence-based analysis and guidance on issues including education and public policy and governance (OECD, 2020). UNESCO (2021) emphasises its role in fostering peace and sustainable development through international collaboration in education, science, culture, and communication. While their stated missions are distinct, and their history includes periods of rivalry (Mills, 2022), both emphasise a commitment to improving education systems and advancing inclusive, knowledge-based societies: their described goals align in many areas, and this alignment is part of the increasing power associated with global governance (Mundy, 2007). By constructing understandings of education in multiple countries globally over extended periods of time, often through large-scale data generation, they create highly authoritative spaces of knowledge about education. Part of their influence is exerted through regular and substantial written reports about country-specific issues, progress and futures. This paper examines how education in Thailand comes to be known through these global expert organisations, arguing that they produce distinctive ways of knowing characterised by particular notions of neutrality. We articulate this idea of neutrality through the prefix 'de' applied to context and politics: knowing that is in important senses de-contextualised and de-politicised. We also argue for the ongoing importance of particular kinds of data in constructing this knowledge.

The concept of 'knowing like a global expert organisation' is inspired by Borie et al.'s (2021) analysis of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) and IPBES (Intergovernmental science-policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) global expert organisations. Borie et al.'s analysis focuses on questions about how knowledge is 'actually made in different institutional settings and the inclusions and exclusions that diverse knowledge practices effect for global environmental governance' (p.1). They draw widely on a range of data to give insights into these knowledge practices, including through the perspectives and actions of stakeholders working in the organisations (using methods of; participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis). They use the concept of institutional epistemology to focus on the 'knowledge practices within organizational settings; Expert cultures of organizations', defining

institutional epistemology as 'a stabilized set of practices through which participants in an institutional process produce, combine and negotiate knowledge' (p.3). By opening up dual meanings of the term institution – a formal organisational structure, and a diffuse range of habitual practices and unwritten rules – they highlight a 'fundamental theoretical tension between structure and agency in understanding how institutions shape action, and vice-versa' (p.3). In the current paper we are more narrowly focused on the knowledge produced by global expert institutions, rather than attending to the practices and institutional epistemologies producing this knowledge. However, these tensions are important parts of the context into which the knowledge is produced, circulated, and worked on over time. Our interest in the discursive environment of global educational policy on which these organisations act foregrounds questions about the relationships between texts and norms, values and aims of education. Borie et al.'s generative account argues that the IPCC implicitly seeks to construct a 'view from nowhere', whereas the IPBES's approach values an epistemological 'view from everywhere'. Against these normative visions for global expert knowledge they argue for the inescapably place-based nature of knowledge production: in both cases these organisations offer 'views from somewhere' generating 'situated sets of knowledge marked by politico-epistemic struggles and by the interests, priorities and voices of certain powerful actors' (p.12). In the current paper we ask what kinds of knowledge global expert organisations produce about education in Thailand.

Critical attention to the OECD and UNESCO has highlighted the power of their roles in global educational governance, their relationships with neoliberalism, and the enduring colonial impulses shaping notions of development and modernisation (Kallo, 2021; You, 2020; Niemann and Martens, 2018; Shahjahan, 2016; Collins and Rhoads, 2010). This work has drawn attention to the connections between organisations, such as in Grek's (2009) description of the ways in which the OECD has 'developed alliances with other Ios [International Organisations] such as UNESCO, the European Union (EU) and the World Bank to actively promote its policy preferences' (p.24), and in Ball's (2012) analyses of generic global policy ensembles characterised by ideas of efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability. Local policy actors' use of claims and norms established at the global level helps to establish legitimacy for policy positions, while also doing work to signal a country's participation in the 'club of competitive nations' (Grek, 2009, p.35). The use of competition as a framing device is highlighted in multiple analyses of the field. For example, in Auld et al.'s (2018) analysis of the ways in which the OECD and World Bank shaped education governance post-2015 with a strong focus on education's role as a driver of economic development: education as integral to constructions of an internationally competitive marketplace (Maguire, 2010). Large-scale assessment, the archetype of which is PISA (Program for International Student Assessment), plays a key role in creating the

competition and in making it visible through a 'landscape of education performance within and across national systems' (Grek, Lawn, Ozga, & Segerholm, 2013, p.487). Kaess's (2018) critique shifts attention to the kinds of knowledge prioritised across PISA, described as the 'epistemological systems of the Global North' (p.349), which they argue represent only a narrow portion of the totality of potential knowledge and restrict students' access to a wider range of epistemological traditions and positions. Similarly, and using a decolonial lens to analyse the OECD's Learning Compass 2030, Hughson (2022) argues that the drive to 'modernise' education on a global scale 'unavoidably exists alongside a colonising impulse which denies the viability of non-western epistemological positions' (p.74). These examples of the substantial body of work critiquing the priorities, assumptions and effects of global expert organisations illustrates their breath. Our analysis of global expert organisations' knowledge about education in Thailand contributes to these debates by critically analysing the knowledge they produce in relation to place-based questions (that is, emphasising the *in Thailand* aspect). We now offer a brief introduction to the context of Thailand.

Education in Thailand

Education in Thailand is deeply rooted in Buddhism. Monks and temples have been important sources of knowledge alongside informal vocational education taught within families; both passing on skills, character and societal values to the next generation (Fry, 2018; Sirindhorn, 2018). Monastic education was critical in promoting ethics, literacy and high arts and cultures to prepare male children for self-reliance, family support and social responsibility (Watson, 1980). Children (boys and girls) in the palace and rich families were formally educated by private tutors, whose lessons or training were also selectively granted to others (MoE, 2025a; Sirindhorn, 2018). Scientific knowledge and advancements were introduced to Thai society through trade, diplomacy and missionaries from the West, and were gradually accommodated since the seventeenth century. The first systematic reform of Thai education took in the late nineteenth century (MoE, 2025b), leading to the emergence of modern education in Thailand, where Western-European concepts and practices of education were politically adopted—particularly in structural administration through the Ministry of Education and in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. This was intended to modernise the nation in response to the pressures of colonisation in Southeast Asia. Multiple types of schools emerged, including; Western schools, public schools, girls' schools and military schools, followed by the first educational plan in 1898, the first university in 1917 and the first Compulsory Education Act in 1917 (MoE, 2025b; Sirindhorn, 2018).

Thailand's educational landscape is dynamic, shaped by major interventions including the 1932 revolution that transformed the country into a constitutional monarchy, successive military coups,

numerous domestic challenges and broader global influences (Fry & Bi, 2013). The 1999 National Education Act is widely regarded as a pivotal moment, and is currently in its fourth substantive development, following the enactment of the third Amendment in 2019. This act is influenced by neo-liberalism in education (Phuaphansawat, 2017). Its core principles are free basic education, student-centred, decentralised educational administration, life-long learning, teacher quality standards, quality assurance and inclusive education for all (ONEC, 2009). The new draft act has been under parliamentary review since 2021.

Based on the current act, schoolings, education and learning are overseen by various government agencies across Ministries and related organizations, including the Ministry of Education, of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, of Interior, of Tourism and Sports, of Culture, of Social Development and Human Security, Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and the Royal Thai Police (MoE, 2025b). Within the Ministry of Education, the central administration is processed by Office of the Permanent Secretary, Office of the Educational Council, Office of the Basic Education Commission, Office of the Vocational Education Commission and Department of Learning Encouragement (MoE, 2025b). Each has its own educational agencies at the lower system levels to work with learning institutions in the regions, provinces and communities, collaboratively promoting formal, non-formal and informal education. Public organisations function as independent agencies under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, including through the Secretariat Office of the Teachers' Council of Thailand, the Institute for the Promotion of Teaching Science and Technology, the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (Public Organization) and the National Institute of Educational Testing Service (Public Organization) (MoE, 2025b). This context helps to locate how the three knowledge practices we analyse – de-politicisation, de-contextualisation and datafication – are able to 'travel' into and through Thai Education, and create tensions between Thai and global education agendas. Thailand's governance and accountability infrastructure includes national quality assurance and testing bodies capable of amplifying the authority of comparable indicators and performance narrartives. At the same time, curricular aims explicitly foreground 'Thainess' (including nation, religion and monarchy), creating tensions between globalising reforms oriented around the logics of metrics and competition, and a culturally and politically significant project of identity formation.

The distinctiveness of the Basic Education Core Curriculum is illustrated in the positioning of love of the nation, religion and the monarchy as desired characteristics (MoE, 2008). Since the enactment of the 1999 National Education Act, education research, policy and practice have been argued to be shaped by six main narratives that hint at the tensions we describe between globalised policy repertoires that travel through metrics, competition and technocratic reform agendas, and

national-cultural projects seeking preserve identity, legitimacy and moral norms. The naratives are: globalisation; learner-centred education; the sufficiency economy philosophy; a person as being smart, good, and happy; Thailand 4.0 and educational inequality (Pitidol et al., 2023). Of these, Thailand 4.0 and globalisation are dominant: a striking contrast contrast to the sufficiency economy philosophy initiated by the late King Bhumibol and promoted as a model for Thai living. Recent national directions for educational research embodies Thailand 4.0 and globalisation priorities, for example, through prioritising the themes of: life-long learning; quality education; educational equity; developing essential skills for labour market demands; technology for education/learning; education for a green society; efficiency in education; and civic and global citizenship education (Office of the Education Council, 2025), reflecting a trend in educational policy development in Thailand where references to reports by global expert organisations are employed as key drivers for new educational concepts, influencing national education policy and pedagogical practices (Medhaakkharakiat & Siriwong, 2019; Sethakul & Utakrit, 2019).

This brief overview of education in Thailand introduces tensions between traditional forms of Thai education and intentional and unintentional semi-colonisation by Western-European and international trends. One broad group evokes the language of 'catching up' with global trends as necessary raise the standards of education, improve international competitiveness, and meet global benchmarks of quality. Education in this sense tends to be more about applying or adapting Western frameworks, rather than developing research-informed, locally grounded innovations. A Thai proverb captures this mentality: 'ขี้ฝรั่งหอม' (khi farang hom) (Westerners' droppings are fragrant). It ironically satires the tendency to view all foreign knowledge and practices as inherently superior and unquestionably correct. Another group (broadly summarised as conservative Thais) perceives Western-European agendas as external and potentially disruptive forces that may undermine traditional Thai values (Sattayanurak, 2019). To preserve Thainess – the nation, religion(s) and monarchy – Thai education has to selectively filter and adopt only those aspects of Western influence that are seen as beneficial and non-threatening to the socio-cultural foundations of Thai society (Kasetsiri, 2022). Lao (2019) described this practice as a culture of borrowing; a Thai strategy to selectively borrow educational policies to benefit from advances in global modernity while simultaneously preserving Thai identity.

These global dynamics are discursive and have practical policy traction in Thailand, but in ways that are mediated through national Thai values. Recent national research directions often prioritise globalisation and competitiveness, and Thai policy development frequently draws on reports by

global expert organisations to introduce new concepts and drive reform agendas. The influence of international assessment regimes is also visible in reform activity and professional learning. For example, policy attention to PISA has intensified over the past decade, with increasing expectations that teachers and schools adopt PISA-aligned priorities. Tensions emerge in they way that global discourses are mediated and translated, being adoped as markers of modernity and competitiveness, while simultaneously being reframed as compatible with or subordinate to national values. This complex dynamic is significant for our analysis because global expert organisation reports often assume reform is a technical response to deficit, rather than a negotiated process shaped and mediated through distinctively Thai culture, norms, political and moral commitments.

Methodology

This research was driven by the question: *what kinds of knowledge about education in Thailand are produced by global expert organisations?* To focus on the 'kinds of knowledge', we identified 21 published reports (Table 1) and collaboratively analysed them through critical discourse analysis. We included reports that were: published by a global expert organisation; included 'Thailand' in the title, sub-title or as a keyword (including tags and meta-data on the hosting organisation's website); made explicit reference to education, and; were published in the English language. Education is a broad area, and implications for education policy might be implied by almost any reports relating to a country's development. For the purposes of this research, we only included reports that gave explicit attention to education in Thailand. We included reports published since 1999. The 25 year period between 1999 and our identification of these reports offers a significant period of activity on global education governance conducted by global expert organisations. The publication of the National Education Act in 1999 is widely regarded as a significant moment in Thai education policymaking and governance (Phaktanakul, 2015), and offers a temporal framing horizon for the period leading up to the present time of writing. By focusing on the OECD and UNESCO as global expert organisations, they are used as significant examples in the international education governance space. We are not arguing they are necessarily the most important, nor the only such organisations: future analysis might usefully extend this work by analysing reports published by other international organisations, for example, the World Bank, or SEAMEO (South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization). The majority of reports we identified were published by the OECD, and we also included UNESCO, joint OECD-UNESCO publications, and a UNICEF report. These publications were presented in a range of content types; Reports, Working papers, Country notes, and Policy papers.

There are substantial grey areas surrounding the identification, publication, and association of documents with particular global expert organisations. There are blurred boundaries of these

relationships, for example, in organisations' maintenance of repositories and libraries of materials. These collections imply a certain amount of curatorial oversight: decisions are made about what to include and what to exclude by employees of the organisation. Symbolically, the inclusion within the collection, and the hosting on the organisation's website under its logo and branding, all give strong signals of legitimacy. Yet, these signals are at times contradicted by small print distancing the text and the opinions it expresses from the host organisation. To give one example, Siltragool's (2007) country profile on non-formal education in Thailand has a UNESCO url, is badged with the UNESCO logo on the front page of the report, is framed as a profile 'commissioned by the Education for All Global Monitoring Report', and the contact email given on the title page to use for requesting further information is a unesco.org address. These signs all make explicit connections between the text and the organisation. However, these connections are contradicted by the statement that views and opinions in the paper should not be attributed to UNESCO, reinforced by the note that the wider report team 'has not edited' this country profile. Answers to questions about the association between the organisation and the text are not obvious, and this example highlights multiple issues about knowledge politics, legitimacy, attribution and ownership. For the purposes of inclusion criteria in the analysis of the current paper, we excluded any that explicitly stated that their arguments were not to be attributed to the host organisation.

Year	Institution	Title	Link
2001	OECD	World Education Indicators 2001	https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/world-education-indicators-2001_wei-2001-en.html
2001	OECD	Globalisation, Liberalisation, Poverty and Income Inequality in Southeast Asia	https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/globalisation-liberalisation-poverty-and-income-inequality-in-southeast-asia_873322617282.html
2003	OECD	Literacy Skills for the World of Tomorrow	https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/literacy-skills-for-the-world-of-tomorrow_9789264102873-en.html
2004	UNESCO	Thailand's National Education Report	Thailand's National Education Report
2011	UNESCO	Secondary Teachers in Thailand	https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/secondary-teachers-in-thailand-secondary-teacher-policy-research-in-asia-2011-en.pdf
2012	OECD	Skills Development Pathways in Asia	https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/skills-development-pathways-in-asia_5k94hdlll7vk-en.html
2016	OECD/UNESCO	Education in Thailand: An OECD/UNESCO Perspective	https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2016/08/education-in-thailand_g1g6a08c/9789264259119-en.pdf
2017a	OECD	Do students spend enough time learning?	https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/do-students-spend-enough-time-learning_744d881a-en.html
2017b	OECD	Building local responsiveness in employment and skills systems in Southeast Asia	https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/building-local-responsiveness-in-employment-and-skills-systems-in-southeast-asia_8455fede-en.html
2018	OECD	Making growth more inclusive in Thailand	https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/making-growth-more-inclusive-in-thailand_263a78df-en.html
2019	UNICEF	Thailand Education Fact Sheets	https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Thailand-Education-Fact-Sheets-2019-EN.pdf
2020a	OECD	Non-cognitive characteristics and academic achievement in Southeast Asian countries based on PISA 2009, 2012 and 2015	https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/non-cognitive-characteristics-and-academic-achievement-in-southeast-asian-countries-based-on-pisa-2009-2012-and-2015_c3626e2f-en.html
2020b	OECD	OECD Economic Surveys: Thailand 2020	https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-economic-surveys-thailand-2020_ad2e50fa-en.html

2020c	OECD	Thailand's education system and skills imbalances: Assessment and policy recommendations	https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/thailand-s-education-system-and-skills-imbalances-assessment-and-policy-recommendations_b79addb6-en.html
2021a	OECD	Towards a Skills Strategy for Southeast Asia: Skills for Post-COVID Recovery and Growth	https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/towards-a-skills-strategy-for-southeast-asia_6db0907f-en.html
2021b	OECD	Economic Outlook for Southeast Asia, China and India 2021	https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/economic-outlook-for-southeast-asia-china-and-india/volume-2021/issue-1_711629f8-en.html
2021c	OECD	Vocational Education and Training in Thailand	https://doi.org/10.1787/cc20bf6d-en
2021d	OECD	OECD Investment Policy Reviews: Thailand	https://doi.org/10.1787/c4eeee1c-en
2022a	OECD	PISA 2022 Results (Volume I & II) Factsheets Thailand	https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i-and-ii-country-notes_ed6fbcc5-en/thailand_6138f4af-en.html
2022b	OECD	PISA Results 2022 (Volume III) – Factsheets: Thailand	https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-results-2022-volume-iii-factsheets_041a90f1-en/thailand_ff214311-en.html
2023	OECD	OECD Skills Strategy Southeast Asia: Skills for a Post-COVID Recovery and Growth	https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-skills-strategy-southeast-asia_923bfd03-en.html
2024	OECD	Economic Outlook for Southeast Asia, China and India 2024: Developing amid Disaster Risks	https://doi.org/10.1787/3bbe7dfe-en.

Table 1: Included reports by Global Expert Organisations related to Education in Thailand

Critical Discourse Analysis

The selected reports (Table 1) were analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA), drawing on Ozga's (2012, 2016) work on the governance of education through texts. CDA enables an exploration of the dominance of certain narratives within education policy, including the ways in which power is exercised and legitimated through language. Informed by a Foucauldian conception of discourse, we treat these texts not simply as representations of educational systems, but as active in shaping these systems. In Foucault's (1980, p.49) terms, discourse refers to 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak… [they] do not identify objects, they constitute them'. In the specific context of this paper this is about what education in Thailand is understood to be and becomes. This understanding of discourse highlights the productive role of global expert organisations' reports in constructing particular visions of education in Thailand, and obscuring their own role in doing so. The aim of this analysis is not to evaluate the empirical accuracy of these reports or assess their alignment with lived experiences, but to understand the kinds of narratives they construct — what is included, what is excluded and what is foregrounded. These questions matter because, as Chambers (2017, p. 16) argues, ''Good' stories, whether true, representative, or not, get repeated and spread on their own.' The narratives told by influential global expert organisations shape how education is imagined and governed across time and space. Consistent with CDA's attention to power and authority in discourse, we draw on Ball's (2006, p. 48) formulation that discourses govern 'what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority.'

Following Ozga's approach to analysising governance through texts, we treated the reports as instruments that govern by circulating categories, priorities and comparisons, coding for how evidence and 'best practice' claims are mobilied. Foucauldian discourse analysis foregrounded the ways in which the reports constitute education in Thailand as an object of knowledge, such as through defining problems, making particular kinds of solutions thinkable, and rendering other possibilities invisible. Drawing on Ball highlighted the ways in which authority is performed, including which actors are foregrounded and with what kinds of assumed legitimacy. These concerns are central to our analysis of how knowledge about Thai education is produced through international reports, with a particular focus on politics, context, and data.

Collaborative Reading and Thematic Framing

Our analysis was conducted collaboratively through an iterative process involving multiple readers. Each report was read by at least two researchers, with initial observations documented independently before being discussed in synchronous and asynchronous meetings. Practically, we read giving careful attention to recurring topics (such as actors, aims, evidence, structures), sources of information, temporal markers, scalar framings, the use of evidence, and the mobilisation of

certainty, individually reading, coding and sense-making. These individual analyses of the texts were then brought into dialogue with each other. This process allowed for the interrogation of interpretations, the surfacing of different readings, and the refining of emergent concepts, allowing themes to emerge through iterative engagement with the texts. Disagreements and multiple perspectives were not treated as noise to be resolved but as generative parts of the analytic process.

Emerging from this process, our analysis is organised around three central and interrelated themes; politics, context, and data. These emerged through close engagement with the reports during the first phase of analysis, in dialogue with our theoretical framing and with each other. After these central themes emerged, we re-read multiple reports with the aim of testing the themes against the construction of possible counter-narratives. For example, in the example of politics - a theme attending to the processes of *de-politicisation* through which contestation, dissent, and complexity are flattened or removed - we tested its application by exploring ways in which the reports might support the opposite; an understanding of education as political. The discussion below begins with this theme, followed by context, addressing the *de-contextualisation* of knowledge, in which local histories, values, and situated meanings are downplayed in favour of generalisable or 'universal' claims. The final theme of data reflects the *datafication* of education — the privileging of numerical representation, comparison, and metric-based judgments as the dominant mode of knowing (Gulson and Sellar, 2019). We now present our findings through these three themes.

Politics / de-politicisation

Understanding politics broadly as the area of decision making and policy-setting, at a national level it relates to questions about where power lies, how it is distributed, who holds it, and the networks of policy and governance through which decision making happens. Drawing on conceptualisations from political studies, politicisation and de-politicisation refer to the ways in which issues are discussed (including questions about polarisation), the range of agents involved, and the concentrations and relations of power. De-politicisation is characterised by 'deliberate and explicit strategies aimed at reducing polarization, salience and actor expansion' (Andrione-Moylan et al., 2024, p.23), and we use de-politicisation in a similar way to Bressanelli et al.'s (2020) definition: processes of concealing points of tension between different interested parties and making 'conflict...deliberately and explicitly less visible' (p.335). They describe de-politicisation strategies turning to:

> decision-areas that are secluded and reserved for narrow special interests and epistemic communities; when visible conflict occurs, negotiations display consensus-seeking behaviour, with wider communication conducted in technical terms; and actors produce outcomes that are problem-driven and presented as output-oriented and responsible. (p.335)

There are overlaps between our analysis of de-politicisation and those below about context. In both cases, the notable absence of specific information constructs a seemingly neutral and generic account, and our fidnings suggest that these global expert organisations produce knowledge about education that is largely de-politicised. The exceptions to the rule we are arguing for (that the analysis of education and development is largely de-politicised) serve to illustrate the rule. For example, in the OECD's (2001) critique of the treatment of workers' unions, the framing of this more explicitly political commentary produces an account that we are arguing is de-politicised:

> Unions and labour militancy have been treated unsympathetically in all five economies. The second-tier NICs [Newly Industrialised Countries] of Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia have had much poorer wage and working conditions than South Korea and Taiwan, routinely suppressing worker protests. In Thailand and Indonesia, militant leaders have been "eliminated", while effective unions have been weakened and sometimes crippled. (p.25)

The strength of descriptions and metaphors jars against much of the corporate-neutral rhetoric found across the reports, and there is an uncomfortable tension between the negative associations of union and labour 'militancy', the labelling of certain union leaders as 'militant', and the implicit criticism of the responses to these collectives that comes with the use of 'eliminated' and 'crippled'. The effect of this combination is to produce a commentary that avoids engaging further with political questions about labour organisation, while also offering a justification for the (acknowledged) suppression and elimination.

A recurring motif across the reports is the framing of education through the lens of crisis and urgency, a discourse that intensifies in more recent documents during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the OECD's (2020c) report on *Thailand's Education System and Skills Imbalances* frames the pandemic as both a catalyst and justification for accelerating reforms in school access, teacher training, and higher education restructuring. The pandemic is framed almost exclusively through crisis, and trends are rhetorically increased to 'megatrends' (p.36) through scale and speed. 'Rapid' is used frequently, including in relation to changing (notably, ageing) populations and skills demand: 'many workers, who already left education, are at an imminent risk of being affected by structural changes. In addition, due to the recent coronavirus pandemic [this is the single exception naming COVID without pairing to crisis], there may be large and rapid shifts in the demand for labour across sectors…these trends would require more opportunities for fast and smooth up-skilling and re-skilling…' (p.36). The framing of change as rapid is tightly connected to the policy demand for resource: increasing rates of change intensify resource needs, and so 'this is where the challenge lies. In Thailand, as well as in many other countries, adult learning systems often lack focused attention and resources, putting in doubt their readiness to address future skill challenges' (p.36). The crisis framing is presented through a technical concensus around rapid change and

forecasting of future demand, narrowing potential solutions and actors to policy responses that are seen as inevitable.

The framing of crisis has strong parallels with those critiqued by Mok (2010) and Appadurai (2001) on the tyranny of emergency, in which immediate crises drive urgent, short-term policy responses that often bypass slower, more deliberative forms of political engagement — what Appadurai terms a politics of patience. Crisis and emergency are used to de-politicise situations by restricting the options available and preventing the solutions as inevitable. Across multiple reports, while the exacerbation of existing inequalities is acknowledged, the emphasis remains on rapid technical adjustments, with limited engagement with the structural political conditions that shape these inequalities. Crisis thus becomes a narrative device that allows global expert organisations to assert policy authority while simultaneously narrowing the space for sustained political debate. In this framing, reforms are presented as non-negotiable responses to external shocks rather than as matters of public contention or collective decision-making.

More broadly, these reports consistently position societal change as primarily driven by powerful external forces — 'megatrends such as globalisation, technological progress, demographic changes, migration and climate change' (OECD, 2023, p.12). This externalisation of causality contributes to de-politicisation by obscuring internal dynamics, such as domestic policy struggles, cultural debates, or historical legacies. Education is positioned as a technical lever for national development, often underpinned by human capital theory — the idea that investment in skills and knowledge will yield returns in economic growth and competitiveness (OECD, 2001a; 2003). Policy recommendations are framed through logics of efficiency, return on investment, and international benchmarking — as in the OECD/UNESCO (2016) report's emphasis on bridging policy-implementation gaps using global 'best practice'. Even where value-laden terms like 'well-rounded curriculum' or 'balanced life' appear (OECD, 2017a), they are presented as universal goods rather than as culturally contingent or politically debated or debatable aims. In this way, governance is framed less as a contested political process and more as a matter of expert guidance and managerial optimisation. The result is a form of aspirational politics stripped of conflict — a vision of progress without politics, and development without dissent.

Context / de-contextualisation

Building on our analysis of de-politicisation, we now turn to the closely related theme of context – specifically, how global expert organisations construct education in Thailand with varying degrees of specificity and attention to local detail. Just as political complexity is often erased in these reports, so too is the complexity of place, resulting in accounts of education in Thailand that are largely

abstracted from the particularities of Thai society, culture and history. The reports analysed often present education policy challenges and solutions in ways that are strikingly de-contextualised, despite occasional gestures towards national specificity. We understand context here in terms of scale, detail, and specificity — the degree to which discussions engage meaningfully with the particular histories, social dynamics, and educational structures of place. In many cases, knowledge is produced through a regional or global lens that privileges generalisability over situated understanding. For example, the OECD's (2021) *Towards a Skills Strategy for Southeast Asia* report adopts a regional framing to discuss post-pandemic recovery, invoking 'best practices' and international benchmarks while offering limited engagement with the specificities of Thailand's workforce dynamics, including the significance of its informal labour market. The report's discussion of future skills needs encourages engagement with local stakeholders, but these calls are embedded in abstract claims that could apply to almost any country — such as the assertion that 'citizens of all ages and backgrounds should be able to develop and use their skills effectively' (OECD, 2023, p.3).

The de-contextualised framing reflects a broader logic in which knowledge is constructed as mobile and transferable — a context-free commodity to be applied, rather than co-constructed, within local systems. While national differences are sometimes acknowledged, they are frequently presented in the form of footnotes or lists that function as parenthetical qualifiers to otherwise uniform regional or global analyses. A key mechanism of de-contextualisation is the use of comparative frameworks and classificatory language that obscure complexity while purporting to clarify it. For instance, the OECD (2001) report labels Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia as 'second-tier NICs' (Newly Industrialised Countries), a term that groups together diverse political economies under a development hierarchy with implicit value judgments. In educational comparisons, these countries are consistently benchmarked against others — such as South Korea and Taiwan — often to illustrate underperformance in secondary and tertiary education. Even where country-specific data is presented, as in the OECD (2020) report on skills imbalances, the discussion quickly shifts back to regional generalisations, leaving national dynamics under-analysed.

Questions about how the concept of scale functions across these reports underpin many of the challenges that analysis of context raises. The tension between recognising national differences and subsuming them under regional trends is illustrated by sections that move from assertions such as 'Southeast Asia's labour market is evolving' to brief lists of country-level skill shortages, before returning to broad claims about job losses across ASEAN. In many cases, Thailand is treated as a representative example of non-OECD systems, with little evidence that its curricular, cultural, or institutional contexts have substantively shaped the analysis. Reports that claim to be sensitive to national difference — such as those referencing 'internationally valid instruments' (OECD, 2003) —

rarely demonstrate how such instruments are adapted or interpreted within local settings. Instead, examples from disparate national systems, such as digital device distribution in Italy or TVET reforms in Germany, are inserted without meaningful connection to Thai realities, reinforcing a mode of knowledge production that privileges circulation over contextualisation.

The Thai case highlights that concext is not merely background detail; it includes culturally, politically and religiously charged assumptions that actively shape the aims of education. Thai schooling is historically intertwined with Buddhism and temple-based learning traditions, and contemporary curricular aims explicitly foreground nation, religion and monarchy as key educational outcomes. Yet across global expert organisation texts, Thailand is presented as a de-contextualised, comparable case within regional groupings or development hierarchies. These kinds of framings articulate policy problems and solutions through portable categories and indicators, creating distinctive kinds of friction with Thai cultural and religious narratives about moral development, authority and social order.

Data / datafication

A third key theme in our analysis is the centrality of data — and more specifically the datafication of education — within the reports produced by global expert organisations. Across multiple OECD publications there is a reliance on macro-level, comparative statistics to drive analysis and policy recommendations, often at the expense of contextual richness or interpretive nuance. This reliance is underpinned by a preference for simplified, quantifiable indicators that facilitate international comparison, even in reports that ostensibly focus on national-level issues. OECD's (2024) discussion on disaster risk reduction education explicitly defines progress in relation to the building of indicator and analysis apparatus: 'to measure the progress in the implementation of disaster risk reduction education policies, the role of government involves: setting the goals…; developing indicators for quantification; arranging tools for data analysis; involving a range of stakeholders in multidimensional evaluation; and providing measures for self-assessment' (p.21). Education policy framed as an indicator-driven, quantifiable system.

The discussion of disaster risk reduction education is also interesting because of the presentation of initiatives through a comparative table spanning multiple countries and regions, splitting 'Emerging Asia' into: ASEAN-5; Brunei Darussalam and Singapore; CLM countries, and; China and India (p.22). This presentation of data makes Thailand knowable primarily as a comparable unit within a regional/political/economic classification. Countries are routinely grouped into similar broad

analytical categories — such as OECD+ or non-OECD — with Thailand often included as part of a generalised cohort. The effect is to render the national invisible within the regional or international, even when the stated purpose is to examine local educational systems. The resulting forms of knowledge rely on selective data proxies, such as using GDP per capita to signify 'effort' in educational investment (OECD, 2003) or interpreting enrolment rates as proxies for 'human resource development' (OECD, 2001b). Such proxies offer the appearance of precision and neutrality, but often obscure the political and social processes they aim to measure.

The move to macro-level comparative indicators that organise what Thailand is taken to mean in the analysis is illustrated through the OECD's (2022b) factsheet's aim of learning through international comparison: 'by comparing results internationally, policymakers and educators in Thailand can learn from other countries' policies and practices' (p.2). It then renders Thailand visible through standardised metrics including percentages, correlations and mean scores, using OECD average as the benchmark. For example, 'with a mean score of 21 out of 60…students in Thailand scored significantly lower than the OECD average' (p.2). 'Students' relative results…are below what could be expected…based on their performance in mathematics…[and] reading' (p.2). 'In Thailand, 377% of students attained at least a baseline proficiency…significantly less than on average across OECD countries' (p.3). These examples are particularly striking because of the report's focus on creative thinking: a particularly complex and illusive phenomenon that is often argued to resist reduction to a mean score.

These forms of datafication risk producing what might be described as 'forced generalisations' — relationships assumed between variables based on narrow and often one-dimensional proxies. For example, the OECD's (2002a) analysis of teacher supply and demand reduces complex dynamics to a relatively small set of indicators; class size, teaching hours, teacher salary, and school expectancy. Similarly, a 2017 report on learning time in OECD+ countries uses macro-level data on time spent in and out of school across core subjects to conclude that Thai students study science for long hours but achieve relatively low outcomes (OECD, 2017a)— an interpretation that ignores the many possible interrelated factors shaping student performance, such as student characteristics, schools' focus, top-down hierarchical structure of educational governance and exam preparation strategies as pedagogical practices (Tangpornpaiboon, 2022). These conclusions are presented as technically neutral, but they carry strong normative implications and reinforce assumptions about efficiency, productivity, and what constitutes educational success. The production and repetition of such data-driven claims across reports appears to validate not only the recommendations themselves but also

the methodology underpinning them. In doing so, they reinforce the authority of global expert organisations as knowledge producers and arbiters of educational progress: the indicators function not simply to reflect reality, but to organise it (Gorur, 2015) — their precision and predictive power are asserted, while their constructed and selective nature is concealed.

Discussion: time, scale and certainty

The findings presented across the three themes — politics, context, and data — point to a coherent set of knowledge practices that characterise the way global expert organisations construct education in Thailand. These themes emerged from the criticial discourse analysis of the corpus as significant framing through which the concepts of politics, context and data were constructed and enacted. For example, the temporal urgency markers and 'catching up' narratives clustered across policy problem statements and recommendations (time); regional and comparative framings repeatedly situated Thailand within broader cohorts and governance imaginaries (scale); and big data framings, predictive statements and 'best practice' formulations contributed to the dominant epistemic stance of confidence (certainty). There are interesting parallels with discussions of climate change adaptation barriers in Thailand, in which global literatures lean 'heavily on old techno-managerial tropes, including a lack of knowledge and uncertainty', institutional gaps, limited institutional capacity, and a lack of cross-agency coordination (Ober and Sakdapolrak, 2020, p.88). In that context, Ober and Sakdapolrak argue that while the identification of these barriers may be 'instructive', they conceal the 'underlying mechanism' of the role that Western actors play in 'framing or perpetuating barriers' (p.89). Their argument echoes the discussion about the role global expert organisations play when producing and legitimating particular ways of knowing education in Thailand.

These knowledge practices are not merely descriptive but actively shape the policy possibilities that are seen as legitimate, desirable, or inevitable. One example in the Thai context is the emphasis on educational policies in response to PISA over the past decade (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2017, 2023; Wichanon, 2024). At present, an increasing number of Thai teachers, regardless of their subject specialisation, are required to complete online workshops on designing PISA-like testing. Many schools across the country have introduced PISA lesson to prepare students for the test. In the discussion that follows we synthesise the findings through the overlapping conceptual lenses of time, scale, and certainty, which offer a way to theorise the deeper epistemological logics at work. In doing so, we return to and extend existing critiques of global expert organisations, particularly those concerned with how knowledge is produced, legitimised, and circulated across uneven global contexts.

Time

The discourses of global expert organisations' construction of educational knowledge are deeply temporal, yet the forms of ลักษณะชั่วคราว they mobilise are narrowly instrumental. The use of speed as a description and imperative is associated with descriptions of countries 'lagging behind', 'overtaking' and so on (Saleemad, 2024), and reports frequently invoke ideas of rapid change, acceleration, and urgency, often in response to external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, echoing discourses and responses to previous crises, including the 2008 global economic crisis (Hok, 2010). This instrumental temporality and its associated 'fast policy' logic of global education governance (Sellar and Lingard, 2013) prioritises the rapid circulation of policy with limited contextual adaptation. The 2023 OECD report, for instance, describes the need to develop education systems that can respond to an 'increasingly interconnected and rapidly changing world' (p.3), while simultaneously asserting that the pandemic has accelerated digitisation and made reskilling 'even more critical' (ibid.). This language is symptomatic of what Appadurai (2001) critiques as the 'tyranny of emergency' — a mode of governance in which crisis becomes the pretext for technocratic interventions that short-circuit longer-term political and social debates.

Temporal urgency is not inherently apolitical, but in these reports, it is consistently harnessed in ways that prioritise speed over deliberation, and immediate outputs over structural transformation. At times this produces a temporal dissonance where long-standing systemic issues — such as the supply-demand mismatches in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) sectors — are treated as if they were newly emergent, without attending to the deeper historical patterns and changing labour market expectations that underlie them. Such temporal compression can marginalise slower, community-led processes of educational change that are more attuned to local needs and values, reinforcing deficit narratives that positions Thailand as perpetually 'catching up' to global standards rather than appreciating singularity and understanding different trajectories and innovations (Tikly, 2017). One implication for practice is the heightened frequency of policy shift aimed at aligning national education with global trends, limiting Thai teachers' time or space to exercise their own autonomy in designing contextually responsive education that meets the particular needs of their students and communities (Pongpajon, 2018; Uerpairojkit, 2016).

Scale

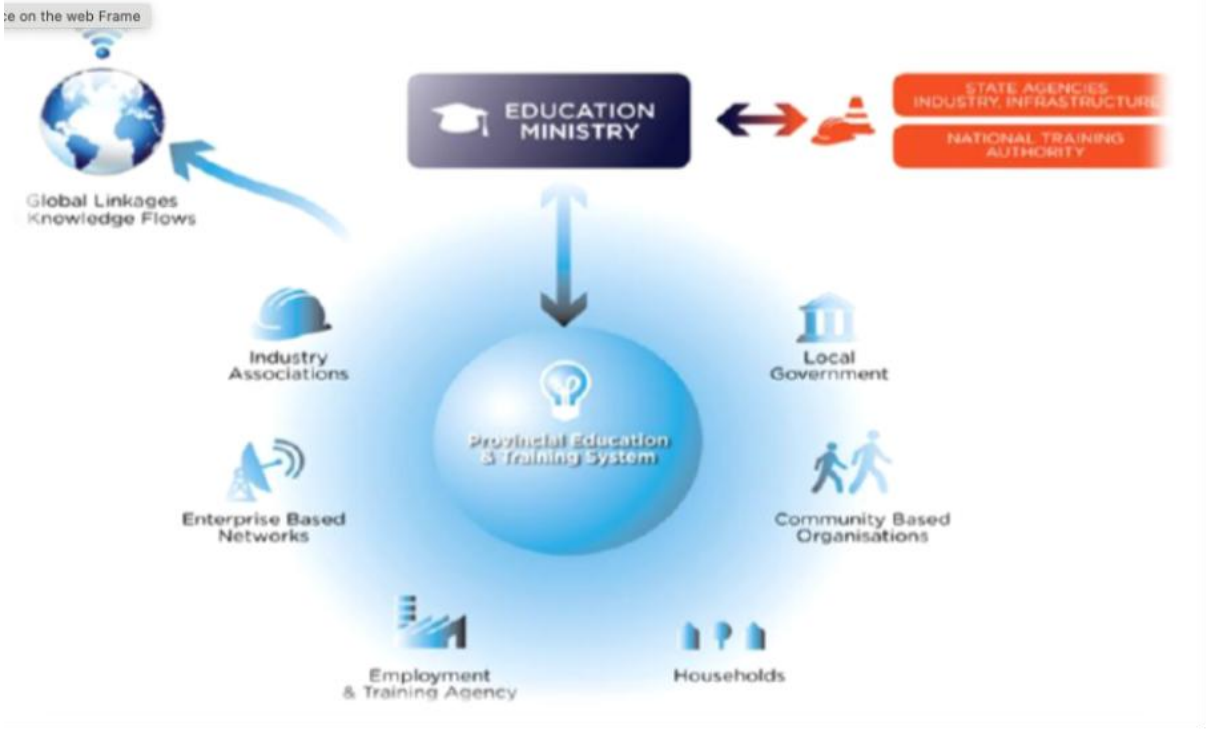
The politics of scale are central to the way global expert organisations frame educational knowledge. Much like Ober and Sakdapolrak's (2020) critique of climate adaptation literatures that obscure the role of Western institutions in producing governance barriers, our findings suggest that scale is deployed to manage and depoliticise complexity. Reports frequently oscillate between the local,

national, regional, and global without accounting for the relationships between these levels. The regionalisation of Thailand through classifications like 'Southeast Asia' or 'second-tier NICs' (OECD, 2001) enables comparisons but also dilutes specificity, as local challenges are framed within abstract regional trends. Even where decentralisation is explicitly discussed, as in the OECD's (2012) visual representation of central-local governance relationships, the symbolic and graphic design of such representations reveals enduring centralised hierarchies. In one fascinating account of the relationships between different levels of governance, OECD (2012) makes the claim that:

> One of the most important relationships in a decentralised system is the relationship between central government agencies and local partners. In many ways, the role of centralised agencies is enhanced. In relation to education and training, the contribution of central agencies may include... (p.56)

This account opens up some of the contradictions at the heart of these conceptions of education and training systems, particularly in terms of the way that decentralisation is operationalised as centralisation through; providing, supporting, co-ordinating, developing, assessing, establishing, funding, evaluating and monitoring. There is a heavy uni-directionality to the terms describing these relationships, even when couched within 'participatory' language which might otherwise lead to local partners playing a greater role. The arrows on the visual representation of these relationships (OECD 2012, p.57) illustrate, perhaps in an unintended way, this directionality. The EDUCATION MINISTRY (all capitalised in original) symbolically sits above the 'Provincial Education and Training System'. There is a vertical arrow connecting the education ministry with the provincial system. Although the arrow is two-way, the shading reinforces the hierarchical relationship: the movement downwards from the ministry to the provinces stands out in dark blue, whereas the arrow from the provinces to the ministry fades to white so much so that the tip connecting to the ministry is not visible. The connections between these groups and global processes is also interestingly represented: separate from the main system, there is one arrow with an ambiguous starting point wending its way to a globe labelled 'Global Linkages Knowledge Flows'. These scalar manoeuvres also serve a broader project: the construction of a standardised, measurable, and governable global education system (Mills, 2022), within which the nation-state remains present but is rearticulated through the priorities and metrics of global governance.

Figure 4.1. **Relationship between central and local education authorities**



(Figure 1: 'Figure 4,1. Relationship between central and local education authorities' [OECD, 2012, p.57]). The scalar framing also reflects what Sassen (2000) terms the 'denationalising' (p.217) of policy spaces, where global logics reconfigure the role of the nation-state in ways that obscure local agency. In the Thai context, this can result in a paradox where decentralisation is rhetorically promoted but practically undermined by centralised metrics and global benchmarks through both the top-down educational structure and the passive nature of schools and educators at the bottom, as described in several studies (Dulyasittikorn , 2022; Fry & Bi, 2013; Hallinger & Lee, 2011; Phuaphansawat, 2017; Tan, 2007).

Certainty

The discourse of global expert organisations operates with a distinctive epistemic logic of certainty: a mode of knowing that relies on the confident articulation of problems, solutions, and trajectories for the future. This is illustrated in the ways data is used to support predictive claims about skills, jobs, and human capital development. While some reports acknowledge uncertainty — for instance, referring to the 'uncertain future' of global value chains post-COVID (OECD, 2023, p.55) — uncertainty itself is often framed as a temporary disruption rather than a structural condition of policymaking. The language surrounding assessments and 'best practices' (such as the promotion of Flanders' testing systems in Southeast Asia) reflects a high degree of confidence in the ability of certain instruments to generate reliable knowledge, even when such confidence is contradicted by the reports' own admissions of data quality limitations.

These levels of certainty stand in stark contrast to other global governance fields — such as climate science as expressed through IPCC reports — where there have been attempts to explicitly communicate degrees of uncertainty and confidence, even as public discourse around uncertainty remains complex and challenging (Puttick et al., 2024). In the context of these reports about education, however, the production of certainty appears as a foundational strategy for legitimation: it is through the promise of knowability and predictability that global expert organisations claim authority. Yet, this certainty is often built on narrow proxies and reductive comparisons that are positioned and positioning, bringing a range of epistemological assumptions and implications for how we might know education in Thailand. This logic of certainty is not only epistemological but also political, and the authority of expert knowledge often rests on its ability to appear apolitical and universally valid, even when it is deeply embedded in particular institutional and cultural assumptions (Jasanoff, 2004). In the case of Thai education, the production of certainty through data proxies and predictive models may serve to foreclose alternative futures, particularly those grounded in indigenous knowledge systems, community-based pedagogies, or non-Western philosophies of education (Connell, 2007; Sriprakash, 2012).

Conclusions and recommendations

Through this paper we have sought to answer the question *what kinds of knowledge about education in Thailand are produced by global expert organisations?* By analysing selected reports spanning 25 years we have traced three interconnected knowledge practices: de-politicisation**,** de-contextualisation, and datafication**.** Our findings suggest that the authority of these organisations is enacted not only through the content of their policy advice, but through the ways in which that advice is framed — in terms of what is highlighted, what is rendered invisible, and what is taken for granted. Using the conceptual lenses of time, scale, and certainty, we have argued that global expert knowledge often presents itself as neutral and universal, while in practice relying on highly situated assumptions and epistemological choices that shape educational futures in uneven and consequential ways.

The implications of these findings are significant for how we engage with the global governance of education. If policy knowledge is to support more just, inclusive, and place-sensitive forms of education, then the knowledge practices that underpin it must be more open to scrutiny and reimagining. Global expert organisations wield considerable influence, but their legitimacy should not rest on the reproduction of abstract, technical, or depoliticised accounts of national systems.

Instead, we argue for a more reflexive and transparent approach to knowledge production — one that acknowledges the political, cultural, and historical specificity of education in places, and that resists the lure of simplification through proxies, benchmarks, and generic 'best practices'. For authors, consultants, and teams producing reports within or for global expert organisations, this analysis offers a call to give greater attention to critical reflexivity as part of report-writing practice which might include:

- Explicitly naming underlying assumptions: including how education and knowledge are defined, what kinds of evidence and data are prioritised, and whose perspectives are included/excluded.
- Situating claims in context: ensuring that even comparative analyses attend to national and local specificities, and resist flattening cultural and political difference.
- Foregrounding complexity and uncertainty: particularly in relation to predictions and recommendations, avoid overconfidence in causal or predictive claims.
- Considering how uncertainty might be usefully communicated: for example, through confidence intervals, and articulating possible alternative futures.
- Acknowledging the inherently contestable nature of education: recognising that the aims and purposes of education are neither self-evident nor agreed upon – to avoid masking systemic issues and value-based assumptions behind technical fixes.
- Revisiting categories and classifications: critically reflecting on the use of terms such as developed / developing, 'second-tier NICs', or 'non-OECD,' and questioning what these groupings assume, obscure, or reproduce.

For future research, there is a need to explore the internal knowledge practices of global expert organisations themselves — the institutional cultures, workflows, and accountability structures that shape the production of these important knowledges. Building on Borie et al.'s (2021) work on institutional epistemology, such research might help illuminate how expertise is constructed and negotiated from within, and how it might be reconfigured toward more expansive and dialogic approaches. We suggest there would be much to be gained by making the knowledge produced by global expert organisations more transparent, more situated, and more open to critical interrogation, which includes making visible the politico-epistemic struggles through which global education policy is imagined, legitimated, and enacted.

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Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.